Ever Ancient, Ever New: The Art and Practice of *Lectio Divina*

St. Augustine of Hippo's phrase "ever ancient, ever new" describes the renewed interest in praying with Scripture that has re-emerged in today's Church. Around the country, parish Bible study groups, small Christian communities, and other faith sharers have rediscovered a simple, insightful way to hear and experience the Word of God with one another through an ancient prayer form, *lectio divina*.

> "The reading from the Word of God at each Hour . . . and readings from the Fathers and spiritual masters at certain Hours, reveal more deeply the meaning of the mystery being celebrated, assist in understanding the psalms, and prepare for silent prayer. The *lectio divina*, where the Word of God is so read and meditated that it becomes prayer, is thus rooted in the liturgical celebration."
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> "Meditation engages thought, imagination, emotion, and desire. This mobilization of faculties is necessary in order to deepen our convictions of faith, prompt the conversion of our heart, and strengthen our will to follow Christ. Christian prayer tries above all to meditate on the mysteries of Christ, as in *lectio divina* or the rosary. This form of prayerful reflection is of great value, but Christian prayer should go further: to the knowledge of the love of the Lord Jesus, to union with him."
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> —*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2nd ed., nos. 1177, 2708 (Washington, DC: Libreria Editrice Vaticana–United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2000)

Lectio divina is a form of meditation rooted in liturgical celebration that dates back to early monastic communities. It was a method practiced by monks in their daily encounter with Scripture, both as they prepared for the Eucharist and as they prayed the Liturgy of the Hours. Its use continued in the Middle Ages in religious orders, such as the Benedictines and Carmelites, that not only practiced *lectio divina* daily but passed this treasure from the past on to the next generations. The practice of *lectio divina* is resurfacing today as a wonderful way to meditate on God's Word.

What Does the Latin Name Mean?

The Latin phrase "*lectio divina*" may be translated as "divine reading." *Lectio divina* is a method for praying with the Scriptures. As one reads and invites the Word to become a transforming lens that brings the events of daily living into focus, one can come to live more deeply and find the presence of God more readily in the events of each day. The method of lectio divina follows four steps: *lectio* (reading), *meditatio* (meditation), *contemplatio* (contemplation), and *oratio* (prayer).

"*Lectio*," or "reading," is the first step in the prayer process. The early monks understood that the fruitfulness of a monk's prayer depends upon the simplicity, reverence, and openness to the Spirit with which the "reader" approaches the Word of God. The goal of this reading is not to rush through several chapters of Scripture. The reader, rather than trying to take in large sections of Scripture, adopts a reflective stance towards a short Scripture passage, pausing on a single word or phrase that resonates with the mind and heart.

This "reading" leads to the second step, known as "*meditatio*"—Latin for "meditation"—which invites one to reflect upon what was read. Ancient monks explained this process as a deep, unhurried thinking about the Word one has read—a rumination, somewhat like the way a

cow chews the cud. As the Word is read in this step, the process of ruminating gradually draws the meditator's focus from concerns of the mind to concerns of the heart.

The Word moves a person more deeply with the third step, which the ancients called "*contemplatio*" or "contemplation." Contemplation is characterized by an openness of the heart, by which the reader experiences God as the One who prays within, who allows the person in contemplation to know the Word wordlessly and without image. By God's grace, *contemplatio* gives one a unique ability to connect one's newly discovered insights to daily life experiences, with the inspiration that comes from the Word of God and that has the gracious capacity to refresh the heart and mind.

The fourth and final step, "*oratio*," meaning "oration" or "prayer," invites one's personal response to God. This response is dialogical and can be understood as "a conversation between friends," as St. Teresa of Avila defined prayer. One takes the time to talk to God about what was read, heard, or experienced, or about the questions that have arisen in the depth of one's being. This response can become transformative when one accepts the promptings of the Word toward an embrace of all that life now holds. One can find God in the ups and downs of life, in times of joy and pain, as well as in ordinary, everyday moments.

This article is adapted from an article by Sister Antoine Lawlor, IHM, D.Min., originally written for Catechetical Sunday 2009.

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